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Post 9/8/74

'The Incapacity of a Leader to Lead'

Carroll Kilpatrick has covered the White House for The Washington Post through four administrations — Eisenhower, Kennedy, Johnson and Nixon. For the past 5½ years, he has traveled extensively here and abroad with Mr. Nixon and reported daily from the White House. These are some of his impressions of Mr. Nixon and the Nixon years.

The tragedy of the Nixon presidency lies not only in the crime of Watergate, which brought it down. Richard Nixon, the politician and the human being, was also on trial. And in the end it was his personality, character and capacity for leadership that were found wanting. Richard Nixon was judged not so much by the crimes of those who served him as by his own violations of the trust that had been placed in him.

History may record that his achievements, particularly in the field of foreign affairs, were more impressive than his enemies will now acknowledge. Yet history also long will be fascinated by what was essentially the incapacity of a leader to lead, to communicate, to harness the power that was available to him to be used for the common good.

All his life Richard Nixon fought for power, but when he achieved it shortly after his 56th birthday he not only abused it but showed a lamentable lack of skill in using it. He was always striving, always seeking to impress, yet he failed in properly organizing a government and staffing an administration.

Eighteen years ago, when he was vice president and campaigning for the re-election of President Eisenhower, Nixon traveled through the farm states of the Middle West and provided those who were with him a brilliant picture of his campaign strategy. It was a time when Eisenhower farm policies were not popular, and Ezra Taft Benson, the Secretary of Agriculture, was less popular. Nixon tried hard not to appear on the defensive, yet he very clearly was on the defensive, so much so that he refused even to mention the name of the Secretary of Agriculture, parity prices or flexible price supports, which were the principal issues his audiences wanted to hear about.

That failure to talk about the real issues told something about the man that has never changed. He avoided the specifics of issues. Instead, his appeal then, as it was to be later, was essentially emotional and evangelistic. He attempted to leave a single broad impression, leaving to the imagination what policies a new administration would follow.

His argument was simple: trust in Eisenhower, a man of good will, a man of peace, a man who has the best interests of the American people at heart. It was enough in that year when Eisenhower was almost certain of victory. But it revealed the essential Nixon on the stump. He did not try to communicate ideas, because he thought that audiences were not sophisticated enough to understand and appreciate them. He looked down on his audiences and he talked down to them. He was a salesman first, and when he won high office, his staff included salesmen from the advertising world. They knew vaguely how to sell things, but they did not know how to put a government together and make it work.

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Another vivid memory from that trip through the Middle West in 1956 was a party one Saturday night in Minneapolis, which a Republican leader gave for the Nixon staff and press. Rose Mary Woods told a group around her how she had first gotten to know young Congressman Nixon and what a deep impression he had made on her.

As a member of the Herter Committee, he had gone abroad with other members on a study mission. When the committee returned, Miss Woods handled the expense accounts that were turned into the committee office.

Nearly everyone submitted a large expense account without providing details, she said, except the young congressman from California. He was meticulous in reporting his exact expenses, which had been modest. No one else had provided such a precise accounting, Miss Woods reported. He was a stickler for honesty, she said.

In the 1972 campaign, when Nixon knew that he was going to win, he followed much the same course he did in fighting for President Eisenhower's re-election 16 years before. He did not discuss the issues except in large generalities; he refused to hold press conferences; he avoided confrontations with his critics; he evangelized and tried to leave the impression that what he stood for was good for the country while his opponent was an enemy of all that Americans held sacred.

There was a non- if not anti-intellectual quality to his speeches, perhaps best exemplified in the series of appearances he made around the country when he was campaigning this year against impeachment. Instead of arguing the issues with the audiences he addressed, instead of trying to explain why he had done the things he had done and providing at least his rationalization for mistakes that had been made, he totally avoided the real issues and instead talked about how deeply devoted he was to peace and prosperity and to the building of a stronger America. Those questions were not debatable and were not at issue. Nixon, the President, was the issue, and he glossed it over by dropping the names of world leaders he had negotiated with in the pursuit of peace.

Nixon often wondered why the press was so critical. It was not so much disagreement on policy as fury over his use of language to shade a meaning, to obfuscate, to leave a false impression without actually opening himself to the charge of distortion. He knew how to talk directly, vigorously on issues, and occasionally in private with a small group he would perfrom with brilliance. Yet on the stump he used language to distort or to obfuscate rather than to clarify. Those who in their jobs had to work with words and with communication of their meaning became critical, to some large extent, out of frustration in their work.

In his list of failures, surely one of th first must be in his choice of people. He required absolute loyalty, even subservience. Shortly after his election in 1968, there was speculation that he might pick Nelson A. Rockefeller for a high post. A loyal Nixon aide, speaking late one night to a small group of reporters, ridiculed the idea. He would never name anyone who might threaten to outshine him, the aide said in a candid comment on Nixon's sense of insecurity.

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ing that it was a superb collection of able men, he neglected it and ignored it. Of course, the decline of the cabinet had begun in the Kennedy administration, but it was almost destroyed in the Nixon administration. It was never used as a consultative body, and when early in the administration Interior Secretary Walter Hickel found his access to the President blocked and he began trying to force his way through the protective wall the loyal White House aides had erected around the President, he was fired.

Months later, Sen. Barry Goldwater said that Nixon was "the most complete loner I've ever known. The man operates all by himself . . . My feeling is that he sits alone most of the time and makes his own decisions."

No other President in American history has been such a loner, such a thoroughly ungregarious man. Most politicians want people around them. Lyndon Johnson was the most gregarious President in recent history. All successful politicians usually like people, enjoy the companionship of their fellows and reach out for support or counsel. Nixon turned inward.

In the 1972 campaign, the President concentrated on his own re-election to the exclusion of other Republican candidates. After the election, many members of Congress who had supported him before turned sour. They noted that when Nixon was on his way up, he traveled in every state to help other GOP candidates, and it did not escape their notice that, having reached the top, he had no further use for them.

The distrust which Nixon showed toward members of his own party actually extended to his cabinet, to the bureaucracy, to large elements of the population that had voted for him. Although he had praised former Treasury Secretary John B. Connally as one of the ablest men he had ever known, he stopped listening to Connally when Connally gave some tough advice on Watergate. Although he brought former Defense Secretary Melvin R. Laird back into the White House after the departures of H. R. Haldeman, John D. Ehrlichman and John W. Dean III, Laird soon recognized that his influence on the President was slight and his promised access infrequent. Meantime, Nixon secretly maintained close touch with the departed and the discredited—men such as Ehrlichman and Haldeman and Charles W. Colson, with whom he still felt comfortable.

In his first interview after joining the White House staff, Laird aroused the President's hostility by telling David S. Broder of The Washington Post that one of the "pluses" from Watergate might be that "the operation of the executive branch will be strengthened."

"There's been a tendency on the part of people to concentrate everything in the White House and the White House staff," Laird said. "The situation has to be switched back, so the departments and the line agencies really have the staff to do their work and can carry on their consultations with the governors, the mayors and the congressmen on their own programs." Nixon even let it be known that this was happening, but it never did.

Nixon came to power against the massed opposition of many of the nation's traditional power centers and he lost no time in discovering enemies wherever he looked. Instead of trying to embrace and win over this wider community, he seemed to narrow his base, to isolate himself from an ever widening number of Americans, from members of Congress, the bureaucracy, the press, and as Goldwater said, even the Republican Party.

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President Eisenhower held frequent meetings with leading businessmen and with politicians from both parties. John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson invited leaders of almost every imaginable group in the country to meetings at the White House. Nixon almost never held luncheon and dinner meetings in search of ideas and intellectual stimulation.

After he had been in the White House a few months, Nixon told several different groups that they should judge him by the promises he kept. Come back in a year, he said, and you will see that progress has been made in the battle against inflation, in the fight on crime and in the effort to get the United States out of Vietnam.

He misjudged the difficulties in all three. Progress was made in the battle to arrest the growing incidence of crime, but it was never rapid progress. Progress in Vietnam took much longer than the President ever expected, and the last troops were not out until the beginning of his fifth year in office. Even then the war which he had hoped to end continued remorselessly on in Southeast Asia with American military involvement ending only after a determined Congress forced him to stop the bombing in Cambodia. As for inflation, there was never any progress, and on the management of the economy as a whole the Nixon administration has received low marks. Inflation is rampant, and the federal budget is bigger than it has ever been in history.

Defenders of the President have argued that he was so deeply absorbed with life-and-death matters of foreign affairs that he could never devote sufficient time to domestic affairs. They said that he even neglected his personal interests such as income tax payments, not to mention campaign planning, including the dirty tricks that resulted in his downfall. But the White House tapes and other evidence now available do not bear this out.

These same apologists maintain that his foreign policy achievements were brilliant and successful and that he, more than Henry Kissinger who carried out the policy, deserved the Nobel peace prize in 1973. Long before Nixon asked Kissinger to join his staff, it is noted that he himself had set as his goals a new opening to China, the Nixon Doctrine, withdrawal from Vietnam and negotiations rather than confrontation with the Soviet Union.

Throughout his years of political exile in the 1960s, Nixon continued the travels abroad he began when he was a member of the House and later Vice President. He knew most of the leaders in all the important countries. His chief interest was foreign affairs, and as he said in his last State of the Union address to Congress: "I have had one overriding aim: to establish a structure of peace in the world that can free future generations from the scourge of war. Others may have different priorities; this has been and will remain my first priority, the chief legacy that I hope to leave from the eight years of my presidency."

The foreign policy record is the one he believes will yet rescue his name in the eyes of history. He could never understand how a nation could judge him so harshly on the issue of Watergate when he believed he had accomplished so much toward establishing a lasting peace. And a large part of Th Nixon tragedy is that he may never understand.